

American

NEWS & VIEWS

A Daily Newsletter from Public Affairs, American Embassy

March 17, 2011

U.S., Allied and Afghan Forces on Track for Transition	1
Secretary Clinton Stirred by Visit to Egypt's Tahrir Square.....	1
First Lady Working to Change U.S. Attitudes on Health	2
Japan Quake Magnitude Boosted to 9	3

U.S., Allied and Afghan Forces on Track for Transition

By MacKenzie C. Babb
Staff Writer

Washington — Due to significant security gains in 2010 and early 2011, U.S. and allied forces are on track to begin a security transition in some of Afghanistan's 34 provinces in the coming weeks, putting "Afghan forces in the lead throughout the country by 2014," says General David Petraeus, commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

"The past eight months have seen important, but hard-fought, progress in Afghanistan. Key insurgent safe havens have been taken away from the Taliban, numerous insurgent leaders have been killed or captured, and hundreds of reconcilable mid-level leaders and fighters have been reintegrated into Afghan society," Petraeus said in prepared testimony to the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee March 15.

"Meanwhile, Afghan forces have grown in number and capability, local security solutions have been instituted, and security improvements in key areas like Kabul, Kandahar, and Helmand provinces have, in turn, enabled progress in the areas of governance and development," he said.

Petraeus said the United States, Afghan forces and the other 47 troop-contributing countries to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force have focused on a comprehensive civil-military campaign to help Afghanistan in developing "sufficient capabilities to secure and govern itself."

As part of this campaign, Petraeus said, U.S., ISAF and Afghan troops have cooperated to increase the tempo of "precise, intelligence-driven operations to capture or kill insurgent leaders." He said in a typical 90-day period, precision operations by U.S. special missions and their Afghan partners kill or capture about 360 targeted insurgent leaders.

He said joint missions to clear the Taliban from long-held safe havens have also been critical, resulting in a "fourfold increase in recent months in the number of weapons and explosives caches turned in and found."

"And as a result of improvements in the security situation ... markets, which once sold weapons, explosives and illegal narcotics, now feature over 1,500 shops selling food, clothes and household goods," Petraeus said.

He emphasized the importance of devoting substantial additional resources to the development of Afghanistan's

security forces, "arguably the most critical element in our effort to help Afghanistan develop the capability to secure itself."

Petraeus said in the last year, Afghan forces have grown by more than 30 percent, adding about 70,000 soldiers and police.

"Those forces have grown in quality, not just quantity. Investments in leader development, literacy and institutions have yielded significant dividends," he said.

Additionally, Petraeus said the United States and allied forces have increased efforts to improve governance, economic development and the provision of basic services.

He said shifting security responsibility from ISAF to Afghan forces "will be conducted at a pace determined by conditions on the ground."

"We'll get one shot at transition, and we need to get it right," Petraeus said.

The transition is set to begin in the coming weeks, with some troop reductions beginning in July and plans for completion by the end of 2014.

Petraeus met with President Obama and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates March 14 to discuss efforts in Afghanistan and the plan to begin reductions of U.S. forces, according to a White House release.

Secretary Clinton Stirred by Visit to Egypt's Tahrir Square

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said her visit to Tahrir Square in Cairo, the focal point of Egypt's peaceful political revolution, was "an extraordinary uplifting experience," and says she believes that the Egyptian people are up to the challenge of creating a strong, functioning democracy.

Speaking in Cairo March 16, Clinton told NBC Television that the Egyptian people are "making their own history," and although the United States stands ready to assist, the country's political transformation is "being molded by Egyptians themselves, as is only proper."

The secretary is the first U.S. Cabinet-level official to visit Egypt in the aftermath of political protests that forced President Hosni Mubarak to resign February 11. She said it was "exhilarating" to go to the square and "see Egyptians with smiles on their faces saying hello,

welcoming me to the new Egypt.”

While there, Clinton said she was reminded of “the power of the human spirit and universal desire for human rights and democracy,” and said it was “just thrilling to see where this happened.”

She told NBC it will be challenging for the Egyptian people to translate the enthusiasm and energy that drove their demands for political change into the political and economic reforms needed to establish “a strong, functioning democracy, more jobs for people, a real sense of a positive future.”

But the Egyptians are “up for that challenge,” she said.

“I feel very good about what the Egyptians are doing. It is an Egyptian project, an Egyptian story,” she said.

She told Egyptian and American staff at the U.S. Embassy in Cairo March 16 that the United States, as the world’s oldest democracy, has had experience translating democratic principles into reality and knows that it not easy.

“We’ve had a lot of struggles along the way. We’ve had our own problems in overcoming divisions, fighting a civil war, reaching out to include women, people of different religions and backgrounds and races — all in the American democracy,” she said.

But Clinton said she is confident that “Egypt is going to break the mold.”

“You are going to show how democracy works in a way that, for generations to come, not only future Egyptians but people everywhere are going to point and say, ‘That was one of the most important historic turning points.’ The pyramids are magnificent, but nowhere near as magnificent as what you have already done,” she said.

Clinton said it will also be challenging to ensure that “no one is permitted to hijack this revolution, no one is permitted to turn the clock back on this revolution, no one is permitted to claim it for only one group of Egyptians and try to exclude other Egyptians.”

The United States supports those who back a process that will allow the free and fair election of those who will lead Egypt’s new democracy, and Clinton said that beyond elections, “what has to happen is to really embed all of the values of democracy into the hearts and minds of the Egyptian citizens.”

First Lady Working to Change U.S. Attitudes on Health

By Sonya Weakley
Staff Writer

Washington — When President Obama arrives in Latin America March 19, he will bring his personal commitment to fitness and health.

That is a good thing, because traveling with him will be the person directing a national fitness and nutrition campaign in the United States: his wife.

First lady Michelle Obama started the national Let’s Move initiative in response to evidence that the number of overweight children in the United States has tripled during the past 30 years and that nearly one-third of U.S. children are overweight or obese.

Mrs. Obama has said that if these trends continue, one-third of U.S. children born since 2000 could get diabetes later in their lives and many others could have other serious weight-related problems, like asthma, heart disease, high blood pressure and cancer.

A big increase in these diseases would raise the cost of health care for everyone in the United States. Right now, according to the Let’s Move campaign, the annual cost of treating diseases related to obesity totals \$147 billion.

Obesity can have long-term effects in less obvious areas, such as national security. “Right now, today, nearly 27 percent of 17- to 24-year-olds are too overweight to serve in our military,” Mrs. Obama said at a recent conference. “And for many who make the cut, years of inactivity and poor nutrition mean that they often are still overweight and out of shape, and they’re far more likely to injure themselves in basic training.”

THE ROLE OF THE FIRST LADY

In the United States, the first lady has no official job, but she has influence because she is highly visible. History shows that most U.S. first ladies influenced public policy directly or indirectly, and recent first ladies have had as much education and experience as their husbands, providing them with valuable skills.

During her time as first lady, Laura Bush, who has a master’s degree in library science, called attention to the importance of being able to read, federal support for U.S. libraries and better training for teachers. Worldwide, she focused on women’s education and health.

Mrs. Obama launched Let’s Move in February 2010, and she has involved government, community organizations and private companies. She has established relationships

with companies that make snack foods, visited schools, spoken to grocery retailers, met with restaurant associations and appeared at events to highlight the need for exercise and healthy eating.

The first lady's involvement, according to Katherine Tallmadge, a Washington nutritionist, author and spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association, is changing people's thinking. "Just that the first lady is pushing it is so important," Tallmadge said. "She is giving this issue the attention it has needed for decades."

Tallmadge said Mrs. Obama makes the problem easy to understand. "She has done such a good job distilling the issue to two very simple things that people can do."

The first is adding simple, daily activity, such as walking. Wearing a pedometer that measures distance can encourage more walking. "It doesn't have to be 'exercise.' The slogan is 'let's move,' and it's the truth. For kids it's running around and playing," Tallmadge said.

The second important point, Tallmadge said, is to add vegetables and fruits to daily diets. For most people, this reduces the higher calorie foods being eaten and decreases overall calorie intake.

"Those two habits can produce dramatic results," Tallmadge said.

DON'T SIT STILL

Mariah Burton Nelson, director of the American Association for Physical Activity and Recreation, appreciates Mrs. Obama's willingness to do what she talks about.

"Michelle Obama is serving as a catalyst to get people moving. She's such an unbelievable role model. Every time she shows up somewhere in workout clothes, I can't stop grinning," said Nelson, who has written several books on sports and fitness. It is especially important for adults to model physical activity for children, she added.

"Kids are overweight because they eat too much and move too little," Nelson said. "Children need about 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity every day."

A simple way to incorporate physical activity is to use it as a means of transportation where it is safe, according to Nelson. "In the United States, the Safe Routes to School program is encouraging children to walk or bike — or ride skateboards or scooters — to school and back. [Older] kids should be encouraged to travel on foot or via bicycle" for other activities as well.

Since the Let's Move campaign started, the U.S. Congress has reauthorized child nutrition programs for five years and added \$4.5 billion in funding for these programs over 10 years through the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. Many companies have agreed to change some of their marketing and labeling practices, and community groups have started local programs to encourage exercise and better nutrition.

President Obama established the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity, and it has developed an action plan to reduce the childhood obesity rate to 5 percent — where it was before starting to rise in the late 1970s — by 2030. The report makes 70 recommendations for ways to reduce the rate, but health experts think the first lady makes it much easier.

Japan Quake Magnitude Boosted to 9

By Lauren Monsen and Charlene Porter
Staff Writers

Washington — The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) has followed Japanese scientists in upgrading the wallop of the massive earthquake that struck northeast Japan on March 11.

The temblor, which the Japanese have dubbed the Tohoku quake, ranked a magnitude 9, not the 8.9 originally reported. The USGS assessment released March 15 echoes a similarly re-evaluated designation released days before by Japan's Meteorological Agency.

"This magnitude places the earthquake as the fourth largest in the world since 1900 and the largest in Japan since modern instrumental recordings began 130 years ago," according to a USGS statement. The scientific agency reports that such re-evaluation occurs frequently in the aftermath of an earthquake because of differing measurement techniques used by various countries and varying sensitivity in measuring instruments.

Because the earthquake's hypocenter, or rupture point, was 24.4 kilometers deep, it qualifies as a shallow earthquake, which is the most hazardous kind, according to USGS seismologist Juan Cantavella.

"The closer an earthquake is to the epicenter — the surface, where people are — the more dangerous it is," Cantavella explained. "As a general rule, if the initial rupture point is less than 100 kilometers, it's a shallow quake. An intermediate quake would be between 100 to 300 kilometers, and anything below that is considered a deep earthquake."

Japan's earthquake has been followed by frequent aftershocks, affecting a large swath of the country and

impeding relief efforts. Even Japan's capital city, Tokyo, hundreds of miles from the quake's epicenter, is experiencing tremors, some of them as violent as magnitude 6.

Earthquakes have been recorded in Japan only since the 1800s. The most powerful quake prior to the March 11 one occurred in 1896 and measured magnitude 8.5. That earthquake caused about 27,000 fatalities.

The final death toll of the March 11 quake is far from known. Rescue and recovery work is still under way five days after the Tohoku quake, but so far teams have pulled few living persons from the heaps of tsunami-battered debris that are the remnants of towns and communities. The wall of water slammed into the coastline and rushed inland, pounding people and property in its path. Hundreds of bodies have drifted to shore.

The March 11 earthquake magnitude was of historic proportions, but ensuing events are prolonging the crisis and elevating the hazards plaguing Japan. The tsunami wrecked a long stretch of shoreline, completely decimating entire villages. The tsunami also caused a power failure at a nuclear power plant on the coast, and officials now fear that reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant are dangerously close to a meltdown. Limited radiation releases have occurred, and people have been evacuated from a 20-kilometer area surrounding the facility.

(Preceding items distributed by the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://america.gov>)